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Memphis Massacre (May1-2, 1866), 2016

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### Memphis Massacre, 1866: Introduction to "The Reports of the Committees..."

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***The Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives made during the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress, 1865-'66, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866.***

This volume contains the report of the congressional committee which investigated what it termed the Memphis riots and massacres of May 1-2, 1866, and a record of the testimony to the committee.

On those two days, Memphis suffered the worst racial conflict in its history, which is now known variously as the Memphis Massacre or the Memphis Riot of 1866. Some forty-six African Americans and two whites died during the two days. The congressional committee reported seventy-five people injured, one hundred people robbed, five women raped, ninety-one homes burned, four churches and eight schools burned and destroyed, and seventeen thousand dollars in federal property destroyed. Hundreds of blacks were jailed, and almost all other freedmen fled town until the disturbance ended. For two days, white mobs, which included policemen, firemen, and some businessmen, attacked the freedmen's camps and neighborhoods.

The conflict started after an alarm went out that African American soldiers from Fort Pickering, on the south boundary of downtown Memphis, had killed several policemen who tried to arrest a black soldier. In response to the reports, Union General George Stoneman disarmed the soldiers and locked them in their barracks, leaving nearby freedmen's settlements vulnerable to the white mobs that soon attacked women, children, and defenseless men, as well as the northern missionaries who served as ministers and teachers for the freedmen.

Within a month, a congressional committee arrived to investigate what had happened. The investigation and interviews were thorough, but the report was controlled by Radical Republicans in Congress and used to gain support for Reconstruction policies. The national impact of the report was the rapid endorsement of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, making all ex-slaves citizens, and the increasing of Republican majorities in Congress in the November 1866 elections.

The report sought to show the vulnerability of southern blacks immediately after the end of the Civil War but it targeted Irish southerners as their major threat (as opposed to white southerners in general). The report blamed the overwhelmingly Irish police force of Memphis as well as the black-Irish competition for manual labor jobs for the underlying tensions that led to the conflict. Yet it virtually ignored the non-Irish whites who participated in the rioting and the role of black soldiers who before the fighting had been given responsibility for patrolling much of the city. The authority given to the black soldiers disturbed and discomforted many of Memphis' white citizens who preferred that the newly freed slaves remain in their subordinate roles in the city.

**Sources:**

Lovett, Bobby L., "Memphis Race Riot of 1866",

<https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=900>

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